Texas Department of Transportation

March 2005

Deliberative Polling – Gaining Public Acceptance for Value Pricing
Austin, Texas - Loop 1 Corridor

FHWA Value Pricing Program
Detailed Proposal

Submitted by: Texas Department of Transportation – Austin District
March 2005

Introduction

This value pricing proposal, which involves testing a new process for educating the public and building consensus for value pricing, has been developed in accordance with the application guidelines for the Value Pricing Pilot Program authorized by Section 1216 (a) of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) in the Federal Register Document from May 7, 2001, Volume 66, Number 88, Page 23077 - 23081. Included in this proposal are estimated expenses for each of the anticipated tasks. Note that these are cost estimates and may need to be refined. This plan outlines the pre-project activities necessary prior to project implementation. It is anticipated that an implementation project would commence after the completion of this study and upon conclusion of engineering and environmental review processes.

Detailed Proposal

1. **Congestion Problem to be Addressed**

The Austin Metropolitan Area has experienced explosive population growth over the last ten years. Traffic congestion is increasing and trip reliability is being negatively impacted. Austin has consistently been rated as the most congested U.S. city for its size according to the Texas Transportation Institute's annual Urban Mobility Study.

One corridor in particular has been the subject of much controversy. Loop 1, known as the Mopac Expressway, is one of two major existing north-south controlled-access freeways in the Austin area. The corridor extends from State Highway (SH) 45 in southern Travis county to Farm-to-Market (FM) 734 (Parmer Lane) in northern Travis County. The expressway serves commuters from both the north and south areas of Austin accessing downtown, the State

Capitol Complex and the University of Texas. Traffic growth, measured by average daily traffic has grown 200 percent since 1980. Traffic congestion during the peak period typically reaches a level of service (LOS) F.

2. **Proposed Program Description**

The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) - Austin District commissioned a major investment study (MIS) of the Loop 1/US 183 corridor in 1999 (see Figure 1). Public controversy over corridor options led to the suspension of the MIS in 2001. The opposition was two-pronged - neighborhood groups adjacent to the facility were opposed to any expansion of the facility that would require the acquisition of additional right-of-way nor did they support elevated structures; and environmental groups opposed expansion of the facility because the southern portion of the corridor traverses an environmental sensitive area and the Edwards Aquifer Recharge Zone. In 2003, the Downtown Austin Alliance (DAA) formed a task force that examined options for an interim project on Loop 1, including a re-striping of the existing mainlanes to create a HOT lane in the central area of the city. Although the DAA strived to be inclusive in inviting interested parties to participate, the task force was primarily comprised of special interest groups and included no representation from the commuter population and very little neighborhood representation beyond the downtown portion of the corridor. The task force failed to reach consensus on a workable interim project.

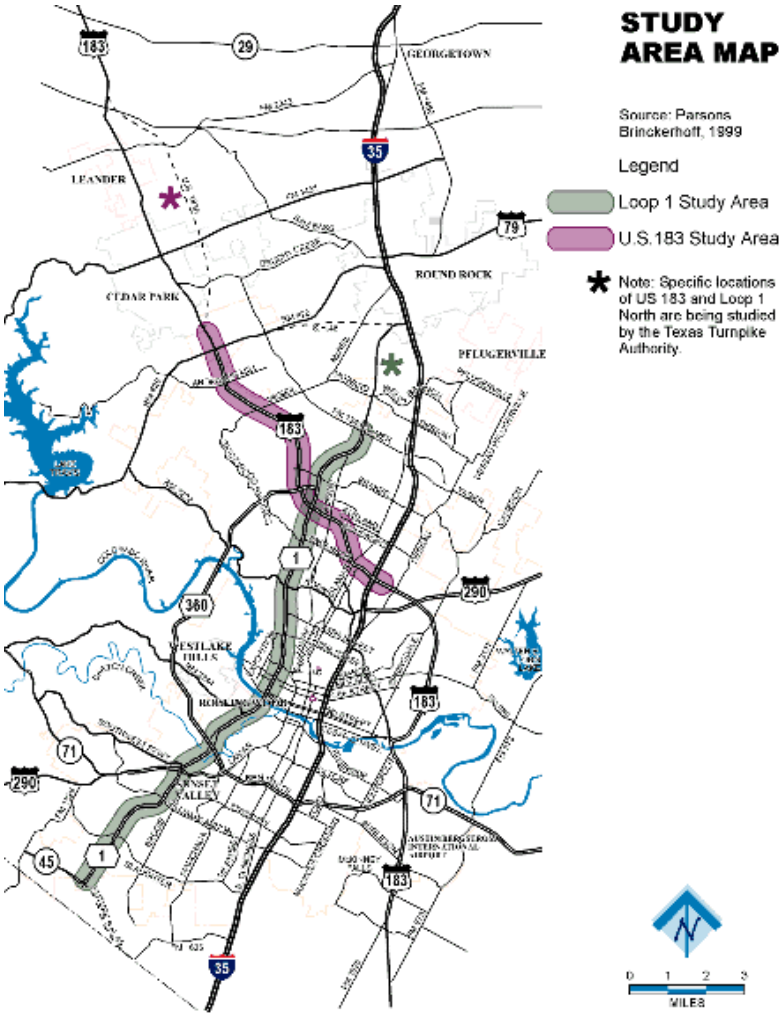

Figure 1. Loop 1/US 183 Corridors

TxDOT sees value in continuing to pursue implementation of an interim HOT lane solution in the Loop 1 corridor that involves re-striping the existing cross-section to create a new lane. The Loop 1 HOT lane is envisioned as a facility that will provide a high level of service and travel time advantages for express bus/bus rapid transit (BRT) and vanpools while allowing paying SOVs to use the lane. It is also envisioned that the HOT lane will be actively managed according to an operational plan that triggers changes in price in order to maintain free flow conditions for express bus/BRT. This interim HOT lane solution will precede a more extensive reconstruction project in the corridor that is anticipated in future years. Additional feasibility and planning work is underway now that will build on the findings of the previous MIS. The planning study will assess alternatives that utilize value pricing to manage demand on the facility.

Because of the contention in the past, the use of a new public involvement technique offers an opportunity to incorporate a new process into a larger, overall

public involvement plan. This pre-project study is intended to coincide with the long-term reconstruction project for Loop 1.

As the TxDOT nears completion of its starter toll system in the Austin region, an innovative tolling approach using low-cost "sticker tags" and unique tag distribution methods will be put into place. The starter toll system is the Central Texas Turnpike System (CTTS), which includes 64 miles of toll roads in the Austin Metropolitan Area. The CTTS 2002 Project is being developed as a state-maintained toll facility that includes three project elements - SH 130 (from north of Georgetown to U.S. 183 in southern Travis County), SH 45 North, and the Loop 1 Extension. The Loop 1 HOT lane will utilize the same technology and back-office operations as the ground-breaking toll facilities in the region.

The technical challenges for the Loop 1 HOT lane will be (1) designing an effective lane separation technique within limited pavement width, (2) locating access points and enforcement areas, (3) developing a dynamic pricing operation, and (4) implementing an effective signing/driver communication system. These issues will be addressed and analyzed in conjunction with the planned interim project. However, the most challenging aspect of the implementation at this initial stage will be in gathering public input and garnering widespread public acceptance and support for a long-term project.

Public Involvement Approach

Because of the volatility of this corridor and unsuccessful attempts in the past to move any project forward, TxDOT is proposing an innovative mechanism for reaching informed consent for the HOT lane project. The objective of this value pricing study will be to demonstrate how Deliberative Polling® can be used to gain public acceptance for a value pricing project.

Deliberative Polling® is a process that combines research methodology with public participation to determine *informed* opinions of a population. The process differs from traditional public participation in that the public input is obtained from a representative sample of the entire constituency that has been informed on the issues. In this application, a statistically valid representative sample of the population of the corridor would be given an opportunity to become well informed and deliberate on the issue. The process begins with a meeting of the representative sample, the participants are then educated on the issues and options. They have the opportunity to question experts and advocates and discuss the options with other participants. The process typically lasts one to one-and-a-half days. At the end of the educational process, participants complete a survey to express their informed opinions. Deliberative Polling® provides credibility to the process by utilizing an informed, representative sample to offer data by way of a survey instrument. The survey results are analyzed and presented to interested parties.

Deliberative Polling® has been used successfully in the energy industry, primarily by public utility companies, to address public policy issues. It is useful because it allows a representative sample of the community to become informed and educated on very complicated issues. It goes beyond a public meeting or public hearing in that the process actively recruits and compensates participants that are statistically representative of the constituency. In this way the process is not overwhelmed by special interests who are more likely to participate and can bias the process.

A brief pre-event survey is given at the beginning of the event that provides baseline (uniformed) data. At the conclusion of the process a more detailed survey is administered to the informed group. The results of the two surveys can then be compared to allow decision-makers to assess shifting attitudes. This will be very beneficial as larger, more comprehensive studies of the corridor move forward. Where it has been used in public utility applications, Deliberative Polling® has demonstrated its effectiveness at achieving consensus among very diverse groups using education to inform opposing sides and then communicating those results to the general public. The public is accepting of the survey results because the initial participants are statistically representative of the community. Advocacy groups are accepting because they are involved in the process in an advisory role, along with subject experts, from the beginning.

Deliberative Polling® has never been tested in a transportation application. The Loop 1 HOT lane project presents a unique opportunity to bring together commuters, nearby homeowners, the environmental community and others to achieve buy-in on a value pricing project solution in a seemingly stalemated process.

Texas has been a leading state in value pricing and managed lanes, with two of the operating HOT lane projects and a managed lanes research program that is the most comprehensive collection of guidelines in the country for planning, designing, and operating managed lane facilities. With the Central Texas region's implementation of major toll facilities, the knowledge gained through the HOT lane demonstration projects in Houston, and the TxDOT research program, Austin has a solid foundation for development and implementation of a pricing project.

Overall project goal: Test and measure the effectiveness of an innovative procedure to achieve public acceptance for a value pricing project with immediate implementation prospects.

3. **Social and Economic Effects**

This project may have profound social effects for the entire community. This project offers a forum for many diverse groups to become educated on the conditions in the corridor that affect travelers region wide. It is an opportunity to investigate a new approach in public involvement where previous attempts have

failed to reach consensus. The extent of equity issues related to project implementation are unknown at this time, but equity concerns can potentially be mitigated by providing an adjacent free travel option and enhanced express bus service in the corridor.

4. **Role of Alternative Transportation Modes**
Previous corridor studies, the current transit authority plans, and the Capital Area Long-Range Transportation plan all recommend an HOV and/or transit preference in this corridor. Additionally, the transit authority has indicated a willingness and desire to alter express bus routes to take advantage of a free-flowing priority transit lane in the corridor.

5. **Timeline**
Study: October 1, 2005 – September 30, 2006
Implementation: 2015 (estimated)

6. **Detailed Project Tasks**

Task 1. Form Advisory Group Assemble an advisory group comprised of experts, advocates, and significant interests groups with a stake in the results. The advisory group will maintain the overall integrity of the process. All significant interest groups will be represented (business, environmental, neighborhood, transit, etc.), as well as public agencies such as Capital Metro, Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (CAMPO), and Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority (CTRMA). The Advisory Group will participate in establishing objectives and measures of effectiveness (MOEs) for the public involvement process. As a minimum, objectives and MOEs will be defined that relate to public understanding and acceptance of the pricing element of the project. *Estimated cost: $ 10,000*

Task 2. Develop Event Agenda, Educational Materials, and Measurement Survey The advisory group and research professionals will work together to develop the event agenda, prepare printed educational materials, and recruit members for panels of experts and advocates. The advisory group will also advise on the content of a pre-event and post-event opinion measurement survey. *Estimated cost: $ 30,000*

Task 3. Identify Event Participants A pre-event telephone survey from a random sample of the constituent membership will be conducted to identify participants for the event. The baseline survey will provide a means to assure that the participant group is representative of the overall constituency. *Estimated cost: $ 40,000*

Task 4. Hold Event A one to one-and-a-half day event will be held to allow participants to listen to and question panels of experts and advocates about issues,

options, and consequences. Participants will have an opportunity to discuss issues in small and large group settings. Stakeholders and the media will be invited to observe the event. Upon completion of the education and deliberation process, a post event survey is taken to register the informed opinions of the participants. Participants selected for the event will receive monetary compensation for their time. *Estimated cost: $ 100,000*

Task 5. Summarize Survey Results The results of the survey will be analyzed and presented to interested parties. *Estimated cost: $ 15,000*

Task 6. Evaluate Process The Deliberative Polling® process will be evaluated in terms of its effectiveness as an educational and informed consensus-building tool for value pricing projects based on the outcome of the Loop 1 event and survey results. The objectives established in Task 1 will be used to measure the effectiveness of the process. *Estimated cost: $5,000*

7. **Evaluation**

Using the objectives identified at the outset of the project, the Deliberative Polling® process will be evaluated in terms of its ability to educate the public, bring in non-traditional stakeholders to the process, and generate public acceptance for a value pricing project. In addition, the information gathered during the study will be used as a baseline for evaluation of public acceptance following project implementation.

8. **Financial Plan**

A financial plan will not be developed as part of this study, but under separate contract for planning and engineering of the proposed HOT lane project.

9. **Plans for Involving Key Affected Parties**

The Texas Department of Transportation – Austin District will be the lead agency for the value pricing evaluation study. The MIS corridor study process included a variety of agency partners. These partnerships will also be utilized in this study and those agencies will participate in the project. Partners include the following organizations:

- Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (CAMPO)
- Capital Metro Transit Authority (Capital Metro)
- Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority (CTRMA)

Additionally, as part of the innovative public involvement process and in conjunction with the larger overall public involvement plan, the district will work with its consultants to assure participation by all affected parties, including but not limited to, community groups, environmental groups, neighborhood associations, suburban commuters, employers in the corridor, local stakeholders and politicians, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Downtown Austin Alliance.

10. **Legal and Administrative Authority to Carry Out Project**
The Texas Legislature passed SB 370 during the 75th Legislative session that gave legal authority for TxDOT, toll authorities, transit agencies, and the private sector to participate in congestion pricing. TxDOT also had the authority, under section 224.154(a) of the Texas Transportation Code, to charge a toll on a facility with FHWA's approval.